

Problems Of Working Women In Bangladesh

—Imrat J. Amin

WORKING women married or unmarried in this country are a recent phenomenon. But as our society is basically patriarchal and relatively undemocratic this is a significant step towards equality between males and females. Bangladesh is a Third World state and hence with more development women's participation in the economy will grow.

Currently the active women population is very small. A U N publication: 'Integrated women in Development' shows that in 1982 out of a working population of 27.1%, only 2.8% were women. However, this is deceptive as noted by R.I Rahman in the same book. For many women will not reveal their occupation to protest the prestige of their unemployed husbands.

Dr Mahmuda Islam an authority on women's affairs and a professor of Sociology at Dhaka University, has divided working women into two groups: one which works due to economic necessities and another, which works because of social factors. Low income women who are single divorcees or widows fall into the former group and work mainly as domestic servants or on plantations cottage industries or the mushrooming garment factories. The latter category comprises the educated women who work to utilise their learning. Dr Islam explains that education has raised the consciousness of women hence the demand for equality with men. Inflation and a desire to main-

tain a certain standard of living have brought these two groups together, thus breaking many social and psychological barriers. More women architects, journalists, managers and business owners are apparent rather than the traditional teachers, nurses and doctors. But more qualified women means that they have to share in the unemployment burden with men and they suffer from the same frustration while those women holding jobs often have to release their posts for men.

Quamrul A. Chowdhury a colleague of Dr. Islam thinks that women have a physical limitation thus full equality is not attainable. Women according to him are more suited for indoor jobs which are physically less strenuous like banking and shop-keeping. He blames Bangladeshi women for falling behind in the 'equality movement' as compared to India or South-East Asian states.

Women here do not see themselves as equal as shown by same time, she does not believe women to be equal to men as they cannot cope with too much mental stress. If she had the opportunity to recruit she would not hesitate to choose a male candidate over a female one she confessed. A subtle point made by her was that women become restless at the time of their husband's arrival home from their work. Also many women leave their jobs after marriage or childbirth or join a different job after the

interval. Nevertheless Mrs. Noman sees a need for more working women to deal with women's problems, especially in villages where shyness is wide spread.

The educated, well-to-do women believe they have to prove themselves 'as individuals' 'stand on their own feet' make a contribution to society' etc. Mrs. Haq is a Master in English Literature and works as a Junior officer at a Bank; her husband is an engineer. She says she is able to work because she has a cooperative and 'open-minded' husband, while the latter believes his wife has a right to use her education, though he insists that the employment be respectful.

Mr. Haq does not mind 'baby sitting' for his seven year old son during his wife's absence and Mrs. Haq too does not neglect her family as she accompanies her husband to most social functions and manages to pick up her son from school in her lunchbreak. This is double work for any married woman and requires much stamina. Housework is not a problem as maid-servants are there, whilst in-laws can tend to children's needs in a joint family or the working mothers can leave their children at their own mother's house. Today not all aayas are trustworthy.

Mahmuda Selina has a Master degree in Law and a Diploma in Management and is currently occupied in Krishi Bank Jessore. Her husband is also highly educated and is

employed in the government. Her income supplements the family budgets. But she explains she also wanted to be a career girl from childhood and because she was educated on the same level as a boy she had the right to work like a man. Conveniently she has no children yet.

It is important that children do not suffer for the sake of a working mother; Q.A Chowdhury considers that the first few years be spent with the mother where she is likely to take the greatest care for her baby. Also emotional attachment between mother and child develops during this stage and if this is lacking problems can occur later.

Many boys complain that girls have an unfair advantage when applying for jobs because they are 'girls'. But career girls want to be respected for their efficiency and aptitude rather than any superficial qualities. Single working women face the problem of not being respected by their male colleagues though they do have the advantage of not having any family responsibilities like married women.

More qualified women holding higher posts means discrimination against them in educational institutions and places of work must end. Quotas may be created in this regard. I personally believe an educated woman has a right to pursue a career but after marriage she must try to balance her career with a healthy family life.